



In the news

Make smart choices to prevent inflammation

It's linked to cancer, heart disease, diabetes and other killers. Yet with better nutrition and exercise, inflammation is easy to battle. Learn why you can't ignore this stealthy problem

TTrue, inflammation might sound like something you need worry about only if you're injured or suffer from arthritis. But internal swelling is actually behind many medical conditions, including some that can turn deadly. Usually inflammation is the helpful tool your body uses to fight off disease-causing germs and to repair injured tissue. But sometimes the process goes awry and inflammation becomes chronic, leading to a host of serious health issues. Fortunately, you can keep the protective mechanism from turning against you by making a few simple changes.

Know the disease connection

Chronic, low-grade inflammation contributes to a number of dangerous conditions that you might never suspect.

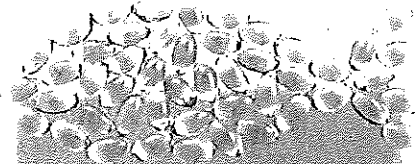
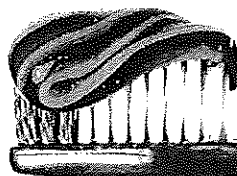
- ⊗ Heart disease
- ⊗ Diabetes
- ⊗ Cancer
- ⊗ Stroke
- ⊗ Alzheimer's disease
- ⊗ Autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis





Stop a silent threat

Use these 10 tips to help curb chronic inflammation so your body can heal, not harm, itself.



1 BE SMART ABOUT EATING

Food can be your friend or foe. Nutritious foods rich in antioxidants (beans, legumes, whole grains, fruits and vegetables) and omega-3 fatty acids (fish, walnuts, canola oil and flaxseed oil) may reduce inflammation. Highly processed sugary and starchy foods can trigger it, as can saturated fats and trans fats. Researchers in Japan found that people who ate mostly veggies, fruit, soy products and fish lowered their blood levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), a marker of inflammation in the body. So load up on anti-inflammatory foods (see "Fight Inflammation with Food," p. 60).

2 WALK AWAY

A moderate daily workout can help keep unwanted inflammation at bay. And you don't have to be a gym rat to reap the benefits. Simply walking for at least 30 minutes five days per week is associated with lower levels of inflammatory markers, according to research at Loughborough University in England.

3 SHRINK YOURSELF

Body fat produces chemicals and hormones that increase inflammatory markers, but shedding excess weight helps reduce the harmful levels. One study, which looked at the health benefits of dietary shifts and regular exercise versus taking metformin (a diabetes drug), found that women who made the lifestyle changes experienced a 29 percent decline in inflammatory markers during a 12-month period, compared with a 14 percent drop among the women taking metformin.

4 GET ENOUGH SLEEP

Shut-eye might be especially important for women. Levels of CRP and the pro-inflammatory protein interleukin-6 were significantly higher in women who got inadequate sleep than in those who slept enough. Set a consistent bedtime that allows you plenty of rest (aim for seven to nine hours every night)—and stick to it.

5 QUIT SMOKING

There's no getting around the fact that cigarette smoke—whether it's first- or secondhand—increases inflammation throughout the body. A recent study by the UCL Medical School in London found that inflammatory markers such as fibrinogen and CRP were elevated in both smokers and nonsmokers who were exposed to secondhand smoke. But there's good news: The damage can be reversed. One recent study suggests that in just six to seven weeks, kicking the habit leads to lower levels of inflammatory markers in women.



6 MIND YOUR MIND

Negative emotions such as chronic stress, depression, pessimism, anger, hostility and loneliness have been linked to elevated inflammatory markers. The theory is that a negative state of mind stimulates the release of stress-related hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline, which in turn trigger inflammatory processes. That's why it's important to seek help for depression or anger issues. And it's a good idea to engage regularly in meditation, yoga, tai chi or another stress-management technique.

7 CLEAN YOUR TEETH

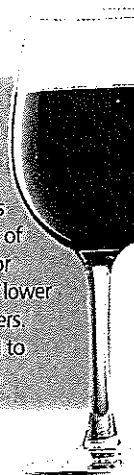
Take care of your pearly whites by brushing them thoroughly at least twice a day and flossing daily. Visit the dentist every six months. Seek treatment right away for swollen, bleeding gums or other signs of gum disease. Periodontal disease leads to systemic inflammation and an increased heart-disease risk.

8 NURTURE FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Positive relationships benefit your health, whereas negative ones can be harmful. Here's proof: Young women in stressful relationships are more prone to inflammation, a tendency that continues for as long as six months afterward, according to a recent study. So give your relationships the TLC they deserve and try to work out any smoldering conflicts tactfully and peacefully. Your body will thank you.

9 RAISE YOUR GLASS

Don't drink? Don't start. But if you do, keep this in mind: Moderate amounts of alcohol (one drink per day for women) are associated with lower levels of inflammatory markers. Heavy consumption is linked to higher levels.



10 TURN TO MEDICATION

Aspirin, statins, ACE inhibitors, some newer diabetes drugs and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen can be helpful. Ask your doctor if you could benefit from one. Lowering your total and LDL ("bad") cholesterol levels—whether by losing weight, improving your diet, exercising or taking medication—also can reduce inflammatory markers, because elevated cholesterol and inflammation often go hand in hand.

